

*MORE HIDDEN WOMEN  
OF THE GOSPELS*



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# Introduction

No other era in history has been researched and described as thoroughly as the time of Jesus. Archeologists, scripture scholars, historians, musicians, and artists have all explored the context of that era. This is an exploration of another kind, one of the imagination. It seeks to uncover more women who moved through Jesus's world as they do through ours, but whose stories sadly have been overlooked.

The women of the New Testament were a secret treasure that I first imagined in *Hidden Women of the Gospels*. The present book is a sequel that follows a similar pattern. To recreate these biblical women's stories, I have used a Midrash technique to enhance the biblical stories, imaginatively filling in blank spaces, expanding on underdeveloped or missing events, or casting them in a contemporary setting or language. Midrash explores the Bible not through analysis but through imagination.

In other words, there's more to wonder about than our limited, time- and space-bound human perspective can reveal. "In more theological or religious terms it is the Midrash, the underlying truth, the inspired layers that are hinted at, that invite but do not force themselves upon us. They must be searched out, struggled with and taken to heart. It is, at root, the mystery that makes the story memorable, worth telling over and over again, and staking your life on it."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Megan McKenna and Tony Cowan, *Keepers of the Story* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 66.

The first book's popularity came from readers who were delighted to discover unknown, imagined stories about people remarkably like themselves despite the centuries that stretched between them. To my great delight, that book appealed across denominational and gender lines. It led to my giving retreats and talks in Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian church communities, both nationally and internationally.

Some religious institutions tend to enshrine "the way we've always done it" and may be slightly rattled to think of beloved Bible figures as feminine. But we know, for instance, that there were women shepherds at the time of Jesus, as there still are in many parts of the world. What a great service, expanding the images of male and female children, their parents and parishes, Fontanini (an Italian company, imported to the United States by Roman, Inc.) did when it included women figures in its crèche sets, large ones for churches, small ones for homes.

Many people remember only one woman in their childhood crèche; Mary was the token female, and the gender of the angels was unclear. So, too, much art portrays the beloved figure of the Good Shepherd as male (Jn 10:1–18). Yet it's not impossible to imagine a woman shepherd seeking the lost sheep. How many women have gone out of their way for the balky patient, the irritating student, the offspring, or a nephew or niece or grandchild who's wandered into addiction or crime? As a new awareness of women sweeps the world, this inclusion of women in the Bible has much to contribute.

In my first hunt for women who were erased or forgotten in the scriptural accounts, I missed a few. The stories that once eluded me now clamor to be told. It reminds me of a day when my six grandchildren were playing hide-and-seek. Those under four didn't quite get the concept; from within a closet a small voice pleaded, "Find me! Find me!" That might work in other ways: first, the hidden women awaiting discovery; and second, God wanting us to seek God through a different lens or an imagined woman's life experience.

So the title applies not only to the quantity of women but to those more deeply hidden. The first book detailed the “low-hanging fruit,” and this one the deeper treasures, but together they work in concert to achieve the same goal: to offer the world of the New Testament through a feminine lens. How did women experience and view familiar events? These stories are always told in first-person point of view, for immediacy. All the women in the previous book were given names. In this book not all are named, so perhaps we could all identify with “the woman who called out” or “the woman who caught crumbs.” For women who lack an entry to the Bible where all the characters in the story are male, this approach opens doors.

## HISTORICAL JESUS AND UNIVERSAL CHRIST

It’s important to differentiate the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, from the cosmic Christ. On the one hand, Jesus is a carpenter and teacher who lived in chronological time with the usual human constraints: fatigue, hunger, thirst, and frustration. He was born in Bethlehem of Judea and crucified outside Jerusalem. The women we can imagine meeting Jesus found him initially quite ordinary—no neon lights or extraordinary powers set him apart.

On the other hand, the cosmic Christ is not limited by time and space but is omnipresent, revealing God everywhere. Jesus arose still Jesus but also with divinity that he shares with all humanity. He could be in two places at once, pass through walls and locked doors, still with a physical presence but in a different form. He is personal but sometimes hard to recognize.

Like the “perfect unity of the human Jesus with the divine Christ”<sup>2</sup> so humans “share the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). The “divine DNA” is held in all creatures, so all creation praises God.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), 29.

Jesus says he is the light of the world (Jn 8:12), but he also tells people, “You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:14). Jesus calls forth the divine in the women he encounters; they are free to welcome or reject that call, or simply remain puzzled, still works in progress. In one way or another they meet his forgiveness, his invitation to fullness without respect to gender.

He brings them more alive and teaches them to trust and reflect on their own unique experience. Because he values his own human experience and bases his teaching on it, he brings them to appreciate *their* leaven, *their* lamps, lost coins, bread and wine, children, flowers and vineyards. Women who learned from Jesus would agree: “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (Jn 1:16).

### ENLARGED STORIES

This book has three primary areas of focus. The first is the stories of people who actually appear in the Gospels. If their gender was unclear in those texts, I’ve opted to make them feminine. After centuries of framing them as masculine, it seems time to reverse the trend. Bright, feisty, lively women surrounded Jesus—and certainly didn’t ask permission to touch his hem or anoint his head. It’s also time to speculate about the “supporting actresses.” Who knows whether Zacchaeus had a daughter or Bartimaeus a wife? When there’s no definite answer, imagine away!

### FEMININE METAPHOR AND PARABLE

One area I hadn’t explored in the previous book was Jesus’s use of feminine metaphor. Because he was so beautifully balanced, integrating the best of male and female, he could draw on the world of women for dramatic comparisons. When a subject—like the kingdom of heaven—is unfamiliar to an audience, the finest

speakers compare it to something familiar, for instance, the gradual growth of leaven in dough. In Jesus's era men didn't cook. But women would have nodded in agreement, perhaps astonished that someone understood their world.

Another unexplored territory was the women in the parables. While these are stories, they ring so true they must have had some foundation in reality. Jesus was the most creative person who ever lived. But like any other human, his imagination had to be grounded in the life around him and the people he knew. He didn't draw his stories from Neptune or Jupiter but from human experience, half of which is feminine. He must have overheard a frantic woman thwacking her broom vigorously in search of a coin, or a young girl sobbing because she'd been locked out of the wedding feast. He lived close to humanity in a world of patches on garments, religious hypocrites, stupid bureaucrats, recalcitrant relatives, empty wine jars at wedding feasts, risky gambles. He heard the anguished scream as often as the chanted psalm. He knew how human life can be kind as well as terrible.

Jesus was a keen observer of the daily life around him, the flow of humanity in relationship: master and servant, man and woman, parent and child. No human experience was foreign to him. With his keen sensitivity he would never ignore or exclude half the human race. Instead, he shaped his dominant metaphors from women's experience: leaven in dough, patches on cloth, lamps on stands, vines and branches, washing feet, and drawing water. All came from the feminine world, women's "image bank." He lifted their relationships, challenges, joys, and daily drudgery into a glimpse of God's reign.

While some might criticize this "enrichment" of the parables, it's important to understand that Jesus stood firmly within the *mashal* tradition—the Jewish branch of a universal tradition that valued the sacred story, poem, riddle, or dialogue as the path to wisdom. (We can think of other examples among other world religions: the Sufis, Greeks, Buddhists, Hindus, and so on.) This stream of teaching was more interested in inner transformation

than in priesthood, prophecy, or politics.<sup>3</sup> It came closer to what Anthony de Mello said: “You have yet to understand, my dears, that the shortest distance between a human being and Truth is a story.”<sup>4</sup> Because Jesus knew the profound effect of story, it’s hard to imagine that this embellishment of his originals for a later audience would bring him anything but delight.

## THE BOOK OF ACTS

Who else but the women would gather the people, tell the story, and bake the bread? The early community of faith was filled with feminine influence: unnamed women at Pentecost, Lydia, Dorcas, Priscilla, the earliest leaders and organizers. They may be slightly known, but the missing element, which can be imagined, is their inner life. “What fascinating chapters must be missing from our history,” says Florence Gillman.<sup>5</sup> But we needn’t mourn an absence when we can create a presence. It’s a different technique from that some scholars use, but ancient Midrash was a creative transmission, adapting ancient sources to contemporary time and place. Scripture is a rich source of meaning that can be discovered through probing and broadening the text.

Due to the “radical lack of knowledge about females in early Christianity . . . women’s stories cannot escape a tentativeness which comes from having to employ much speculation, even imagination.”<sup>6</sup> The imagination has held an honored place throughout Christian history, especially uplifted by Saint Joan of Arc and Saint Ignatius. Midrash was used by Jewish rabbis long before Christians adapted it.

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<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—A New Perspective on Christ and His Message* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2008), 23–24.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony de Mello, *One Minute Wisdom* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Florence Gillman, *Women Who Knew Paul* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 70.

<sup>6</sup> Gillman, *Women Who Knew Paul*, 14–15.

The rabbis, like modern readers, often found the text of the Bible obscure, and in general recognized that scripture spoke with an economy of language. . . . The biblical narratives had to be updated, ethical and cultural perspectives modernized, and new tales composed out of the silence of scripture. By means of midrash, the Bible was wrapped in the garment of contemporary perceptions, issues and concerns, and thus transformed; in turn the contemporary world was perceived in the light of scripture, and thereby illuminated.<sup>7</sup>

### WHY BOTHER?

Those who practice yoga, or anyone trying to achieve balance, discover how hard it is to stand on one foot. If prompted to do so for a prolonged stretch, we inevitably wobble, reach for the wall, or crash unceremoniously. There may be an analogy here to a church that for centuries has tried to stand on one male foot. Imagining the women's stories, including them in homilies, sermons, newsletters, retreats, workshops, and bulletins, might restore a much needed balance.

As we make these efforts and explore the scriptures, bear in mind that we move in mystery, remembering what Albert Einstein said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. . . . It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder, and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead—his eyes are closed."<sup>8</sup>

This effort to imagine the women in the Gospels follows Jesus's model. He never took the oppressive, "putting down" role of other men in his era, disparaging women. His treatment of women, befriending, including and learning from them, departed from cus-

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<sup>7</sup> *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1985), 595.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Einstein, *Living Philosophies* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931).



tom in a culture where the rabbis taught that it would be “better that the Torah be burned than placed in the mouth of a woman.” How dramatically he broke the taboos; how farsightedly he called people to a larger vision of God’s reign. Only an extraordinary man, one who lived the full spectrum of humanity, could compare his approaching passion to a woman’s pain in labor, her joy in a child’s birth (Jn 16:21). How it must have saddened him to hear the traditional proverb: “When a boy child comes, peace comes. When a girl child comes, nothing comes.” How could his contemporaries so utterly discount half of God’s creation? To what extent do we, centuries later, continue that affront? “Enough!” said Jesus, and began a revolution in attitudes toward and recognition of women that has still not been fully achieved.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

This book isn’t restricted to stories or metaphors, but it provides launching pads for personal reflection and discussion. Perhaps a story will prompt a new way of thinking about the scripture or one’s own experience. The questions that follow each story help us to take ownership of the material. In reading scripture we see a wide spectrum of responses to Jesus. As in the words of John’s Prologue:

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:10–14)

Some accept him and respond immediately, like Mary at the annunciation; others question him, like Martha after Lazarus’s

death, or understand more gradually, as did the woman at the well or Nicodemus. Still others never have a glimmer, and even Jesus grows exasperated, asking Philip: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?"

In this book each woman meets and receives Jesus according to her own circumstances, personality, gifts, background, and so forth. As in canonical texts, some come quickly; others wonder or waver; others never seem to understand. Transpose Jesus's effect into the world of art. Picture the miners painted by van Gogh, the ballerinas portrayed by Degas, or Toulouse-Lautrec's dancers, singers, prostitutes, and laundresses, vivid spots of flashing color against the dark suits and top hats of the men who surround them. We may speculate on their stories but never really know them as well as we know ourselves. And ultimately, the question is not only do *they* get Jesus's message, but do *I*? The questions provided at the end of each chapter are for individuals to take ownership of the material, either through personal reflection or group discussion. Jesus's primary focus was personal transformation. In his probing conversation with the Samaritan woman or his witty exchange with the Canaanite woman, he wasn't preaching doctrine. As Cynthia Bourgeault notes, "The hallmark of these wisdom teachers was their use of pithy sayings, puzzles, and parables rather than prophetic pronouncements or divine decree. They spoke to people in the language that people spoke, the language of story rather than law."<sup>9</sup>

We may think of Jesus as a priest, but he didn't do well with the religious structures of his day. He was kicked out of a synagogue and almost thrown over a cliff, people were so angry with him.<sup>10</sup> The religious authorities harassed him as he taught and ultimately turned him over to Pilate as a criminal deserving death. Nor was he a prophet, particularly interested in overthrowing the Roman occupation.

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<sup>9</sup> Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, 23–24.

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 9 of this book, "Stowaway in the Synagogue."

But his vital interest in each person's dignity, becoming the most she could be, is revealed in a procession of characters who enflesh 1 John 3:1: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." "That is what we are" is what Frederick Buechner calls "the curt monosyllables of fact."<sup>11</sup> These five short words contain the essence of Jesus's message. And all the stories come down to these many faces of Jesus in and through women, the mighty daughters of God.

## GROUP RESOURCES

Some people may want to use *More Hidden Women of the Gospels* in a group: a book club, a community retreat, a class, any gathering where the resources in the last section may be helpful. These monologues (with one exception) are shorter versions of some chapters that appear in Parts I, II, and III, because a whole chapter might be too long to read aloud or follow by ear. The shorter versions give the gist of the character and serve as discussion starters. Specific directives appear with some. All entail finding one or more people who are skillful at reading aloud and giving them time to read through the monologue in advance—which should take only a few minutes.

The monologues can certainly be adapted to a particular setting, and some of the guidelines for use include having group members interview the character with their own questions; having the character chat with someone who was important in her life, played by another group member; asking about her relationship to Jesus, including when they first met, and how the relationship developed—or failed to develop. Dramatizing scripture or playing with different angles on it isn't irreverent; indeed, it can make it more relevant to our day and age, our current concerns.

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<sup>11</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus* (New York: Riverwood/ Simon and Schuster, 1974), 128.

Laughter is always welcome as we try to adapt, having fun in bringing ourselves to the ancient texts—and them to us.

The Book of Nehemiah records an interesting response to scripture. When Ezra the priest reads it aloud to the people “from daybreak until midday,” one might expect them to doze off or get hungry. Instead, they weep aloud, because they haven’t quite measured up to it. Not the response the leaders intended. They’ve survived the Babylonian captivity, so Nehemiah and Ezra encourage them: “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared . . . and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Neh 8:10). The people throw a party and “make great rejoicing” because they’ve understood the Bible anew. Perhaps women should feast too, discovering how validated and important they are in texts that may have seemed distant or exclusionary. Knowing Jesus’s welcome to women, let’s rejoice. Celebrate!